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Amconsul RECIFE

April 17, 1970

Dom Helder Camara's Political Role in Brazil

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2. A conversation between Dom Helder and the ConGen Political Officer on April 10, 1970, tends to give oblique confirmation to this report, at least as far as Dom Helder's activities in Brazil are concerned.

3. Dom Helder said that, in January, the Pope had received him graciously and allowed him to read verbatim a report he had prepared containing his ideas on the need for a worldwide campaign for "Peace with Justice" to combat poverty and social injustice, "the greatest violence of all." He said he told the Pope that he received many offers to speak outside of Brazil, especially from universities and youth-connected organizations, and that he felt he had a message to offer. However, he asked the Pope for direct instructions, "should I return to Brazil and tend strictly to the affairs of my diocese, or should I travel and speak outside the country as the opportunity offers?" Dom Helder said the Pope told him that he should continue to travel, to maintain the closest possible contact with youth, and to "be an example to other priests that our vocation still has great relevance." He said the Pope authorized him to be absent from Recife up to four times a year.

Group 3

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4. Dom Helder evaded a direct question regarding any instructions given by the Pope on his relations with the Brazilian regime. However, he did reply to a comment that some members of the Brazilian Catholic clergy found themselves in a difficult moral position between their desire to speak out against what they regarded as social injustices and the advisability of avoiding conflict with the regime. Dom Helder said, "I have found my solution; I will condemn worldwide social injustice outside of Brazil and hope reports of my activities abroad reach home."

5. Dom Helder said he would depart on his next foreign tour on May 19 after attending the first part of a meeting of the CNBB (National Conference of Brazilian Bishops) in Brasilia. He plans to attend a national youth congress in Vienna, receive an honorary degree (theology) at the University of Louvain, participate in various meetings in France (including Paris and Orleans), and end his trip by taking part in an eight-day series of ecumenical television roundtable discussions in Berlin. (Dom Helder said following his Berlin stay, he might or might not be able to return to Brazil by way of the United States in order to receive an honorary degree (philosophy) offered by Holy Cross College.)

6. COMMENT: Although he is the outspoken leader of the progressive wing of the Brazilian Church and a harsh critic of social injustice in Brazil and elsewhere, Dom Helder has always remained faithful to the theological dictums of the Vatican and to his vow of obedience. Therefore, he could be expected to respond positively to instructions from the Pope to assume a lower political profile in Brazil if such instructions were, in fact, given. His "solution" of speaking out against social injustice outside of Brazil may indicate either receipt of such instructions, or his realization that he is increasingly denied access to most media in Brazil through informal censorship by the regime, or both. His decision to attend only part of the CNBB meeting where he has usually led the forces pushing for more militant stands by the Church on social/economic matters, also may indicate a measure of at least public withdrawal from controversial activities within Brazil. Certainly, in an interview published in the March 26-April 1 issue of the Rio de Janeiro weekly O Pasquim, Dom Helder seems to have studiously avoided controversy.

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It will be recalled that Cavalciera, Rector of the Recife Theological Institute, was arrested in Porto Alegre late last year in connection with a group of Dominican priests who are accused of association with a terrorist organization. Although Cavalciera was subsequently released and has now resumed his duties in Recife, such a nomination by Dom Helder, if made, would indicate that he is not yet reconciled to shying away from any and all controversy while in Brazil and in matters relating to Church-State relations.

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AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

June 16, 1970

11th General Assembly of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), Brasilia, May 17/27, 1970

Brasilia's 166, Rio's 3625, Brasilia's 173 repeated to Washington as Rio's 3739

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Summary

The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil met in Brasilia for eleven days in May. Although the main subjects on the agenda concerned liturgical matters, education of the clergy, and internal reforms, public interest was focused on the question of torture. After much debate among the bishops and lobbying by the government against a critical statement, the CNBB overwhelmingly approved the "Pastoral of Brasilia." The document, which condemns violence and torture in any form, is carefully worded to balance critical statements with explanations and with praise for the government in certain areas. The government's reaction to the "Pastoral" was to encourage favorable comment on its positive aspects and to make little or no comment on its critical sections. The conference and the resulting document indicate a desire on the part of the Church and the government for dialogue and cooperation. The conference ended with the Church seemingly united, although criticism by liberal elements may revive if the GOB does not take positive measures to prevent torture.

The Pastoral Letter

1. The publication of the Pastoral Letter of Brasilia at the end of the bishops' conference has generated considerable comment and discussion. Although the document, approved at the conference by a vote of 159 to 21 with two abstentions, deals mainly with matters directly related to ecclesiastical questions, it is the last section, "Aspects of National Life," that has drawn major attention in the press and Group 3 - Downgraded at 12-year intervals
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government circles. This part focuses on torture, violence, genocide, political prisoners, economic development, and human values.

2. The carefully worded document represents an effort on the part of the bishops to put together a statement acceptable to a majority in which they speak out on questions which clearly concern them without unduly offending the government with strong attacks and criticisms. They clearly wished to avoid any step which would foreclose dialogue with the government. The Pastoral is also an effort to deal with various church matters, which were the major focus of the conference, and to play down the political questions, which were important but not primary.

Ecclesiastical Questions

3. Discussions during the assembly revolved in large part around internal reforms and liturgical matters. Certain liturgical questions, such as the baptismal ritual and the mass, were considered important items in the conference's agenda, as the Vatican had left decisions in these matters to each country's church. The modifications approved in the CNBB Statutes represent the second major reform of the Statutes since the CNBB's founding in 1952. The first revisions were in 1964, immediately following the Vatican II Council. Besides allowing laymen greater participation in church affairs, the revisions will decentralize the church a bit by giving greater importance and autonomy to the fourteen Pastoral regions of Brazil. The purpose is to make the church more responsive to the particular circumstances that prevail in any one region.

4. After the discussion of the role of the laity had been closed, a group of 200 laymen from various parts of the country presented the CNBB with a document demanding that the church make a public statement on certain problems, such as "abusive experiments with the liturgy" and, especially, Marxist influences within the church. Cardinal Agnelo Rossi stated that, although the document had arrived too late for consideration at the assembly, it would be sent to the proper organ for study and reply. Considerable time was spent also on the education and formation of priests in consequence of guidelines received from the Vatican.

5. Actual decisions on all these matters were made by voting through multiple-choice questionnaires which all participants received. The objective of these discussions and decisions seemed to be an attempt to up-date the church and to make it more effective within the conditions that exist in Brazil today. In the beginning of the Pastoral Letter the bishops mention that the church has been going through a crisis in the last few years but must not be left behind by the changes taking place in the world. The church must also change. There are aspects, however, that are not subject to transformation, as they are an integral part of what the church stands for.

The Torture Issue

6. When the conference began, it appeared that there would be little official contact between the bishops and the government. A request by Dom Helder Camara (Archbishop of Olinda and Recife) for an audience with President Medici was turned down, although this is more indicative of the government's attitude toward Dom Helder, a strong critic of the government, than toward the CNBB. Later during the conference, however, this situation changed: President Medici received almost one hundred bishops who made a courtesy call at Planalto Palace; Minister of Justice Alfredo Buzaid met with a small group; and the President hosted a lunch at the end of the 11-day assembly which included dignitaries from CNBB, the Eucharistic Congress, and the government.

7. There was, moreover, much unannounced contact resulting from indications that the conference might issue a strong statement on torture. When it appeared that the bishops were considering such a statement, the government began to lobby among the participants in order to make its views clearly known and to convince the bishops that it was interested in dialogue and cooperation with the church. Colonel Manso Neto from SNI and Colonel Otavio Costa from Public Relations in the Presidency, had various conversations with assembly leaders. Moreover, some church leaders were houseguests of government leaders during the assembly, undoubtedly opening another channel of contact. All these efforts helped to prevent a document more critical of the government than that which resulted but were unsuccessful in preventing any statement at all.

8. After the first discussions among the bishops, there was considerable debate on 1) whether to issue any statement and 2), in the case of such a declaration, what to say. A group of liberal bishops proposed a draft which criticized the government for use of torture regardless of reasons and justifications. The vote within the group studying the matter was 12-12. Dom Vicente Scherer (Archbishop of Porto Alegre) offered to cast the tie-breaking vote as chairman of the assembly in the absence of Cardinal Agnelo Rossi, who had not yet arrived. Knowing that Dom Vicente would vote against the proposal, Bishop Clemente Iznard (Nova Iguaçu) challenged his right to cast the vote, which, although allowed by custom, is not in the regulations. Iznard was supported by Dom Ivo Lorscheider (Auxiliary Bishop of Porto Alegre), Dom José Lamartine Suarez (Auxiliary Bishop of Olinda and Recife), Dom Valdir Calheiros (Bishop of Volta Redonda). The vote thus remained a tie.

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10. The Pastoral Letter which was published indicates that the bishops subsequently worked out a compromise, thus mentioning terrorism and torture together and balancing what could be taken as criticism of the government with support in certain areas. After condemning violence in any form, the Letter mentions that injustices have been committed in Brazil and that torture seems to have taken place in certain cases. It is up to the government to investigate such cases in depth in order to clear Brazil's name and to reassure the Brazilian people. The statement continues that, even if cases of torture are proved, it would be difficult to consider them part of official policy. In the next paragraph, the bishops condemn all torture in any part of the world. The document praises the government for its efforts in economic development, but it states that more emphasis should be given to the human element, that is, to social programs such as education and health. Finally, the document repudiates the campaign in other countries to accuse Brazil of genocide against the Indians. Eyewitnesses (forty missionaries were cited) disproved these charges.

11. The informal meeting between Minister of Justice Alfred Buzaid and a group of bishops turned into a rather heated discussion. When Buzaid stated that there was no proof of the existence of torture in Brazil, bishop Jose Pedro Costa said he had been informed of ninety-eight cases in the state of Guanabara alone, thirty of them confirmed. The Minister was also challenged on his statements concerning a link between some Dominican priests and communist leader Carlos Marighela. After these and other exchanges during the meeting, the secretary-general of CNBB, Dom Aluizio Lorscheider, decided to erase the recorded tapes of the meeting--all conference meetings are recorded--on the grounds that the encounter with Buzaid was not part of the agenda.

Campaign Against Brazil

12. After his meeting with the Bishops, the Minister read a statement to the press in which he discussed the campaign of certain foreign newspapers against Brazil. He said the campaign has three phases: 1) accusations of genocide against Brazil's Indian population; 2) allegations of dissension between the Church and the State, including religious persecution; 3) accusations of violence and torture by the government. Buzaid maintained that, after being discredited in the first two parts, the foreign press began the third set of accusations. However, even if there has been a case of torture, in a big country like Brazil one cannot generalize from an isolated fact. The Minister mentioned that the prisoners released in exchange for the kidnapped Japanese consul showed no signs of being tortured or mistreated, even though the press has said otherwise before their release.

13. Several days after the conference, Cardinal Agnelo Rossi, President of the CNBB, granted an interview to the newspaper "O Estado de São Paulo", in which he answered questions on a variety of Church-related matters. When asked about the church's position on the torture issue, the Cardinal gave the same analysis of the attacks in the foreign press as that given by Buzaid, that is, there are three distinct parts to the campaign. He also said, however, that the government must give assurances that it will take measures against any torturers that are discovered, and that Brazil should make an effort to remove this black mark from its image abroad.

Church's Position

14. In all sectors of the church, conservative and liberal alike, there is deep concern with persecution of priests. The church liberals, as indicated by their actions at the assembly, would like a strong statement on the matter, criticizing the government for alleged incidents of torture of clergymen implicated with terrorists and for the detention of others without trial or stated charges. Other members of the church, such as Cardinal Agnelo Rossi, would prefer to soften such criticisms and maintain some sort of dialogue and cooperation with the government as a means of protecting the church and the clergy. Cardinal Scherer, in past statements, also supported this position strongly, although he has challenged the government to prove in court charges that some bishops and priests are guilty of subversion. In his view, if due process were guaranteed, the charges could be investigated. Innocent priests would be released; guilty priests would be punished.

Reaction of Government

15. The reaction of the government to the Pastoral was to encourage favorable comment on its positive aspects, such as the bishops' willingness to work with the government for development, and little or no comment on those sections which are critical of the government. Press comments were favorable, and the government leader in the Chamber of Deputies, Deputy Raymundo Padilha, praised the document for its prudence and balance. Also indicative of the government's decision not to adopt a negative position on the critical parts of the Pastoral was the normal attendance by government officials at the National Eucharistic Congress following the CNBB meeting (Brasilia 173).

16. Comment: The Pastoral Letter clearly states the Church's position at the moment is one of concern but willingness to cooperate with the government. It is difficult to assess whether the CNBB assembly has left the church more united than before. The official vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the document, but the unity may be illusory, as liberal elements wait to see what happens in the coming months.

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